

Setting the Historical Stage by Robert F. Karolevitz*

*Summer heat or snows,
Mountain, plain or prairie fields,
South Dakota's people are
The grandest crop she grows.*

- Badger Clark

South Dakota lies in the very heartland of North America. A total of 77,047 square miles of diverse land area - approximately 370 miles long by 210 miles wide - constitutes the mid-continental common-wealth which is 16th among the 50 United States in size, 46th in population (2000 census: 754,844), 39th or 40th (with its twin, North Dakota) in admission to the Union.

The dam-harnessed Missouri River - which has been known popularly through the years as the "Big Muddy" or the "Old Mizzou" - divides the state into two distinct sections, geographically and philosophically.

It has been called a "land of savage extremes," with temperatures ranging from 40 degrees below zero to 116 above, although these low and high points are relatively infrequent. It offsets its eerie Badlands - called "hell with the fires burned out" by George Armstrong Custer - with the richly productive black loam of the southeastern corner of the state. It has known blizzards, floods, dust storms and drouth - but one day of a South Dakota springtime or its matchless Indian summer makes one forget immediately the rigors of a chilling winter or a scorching July.

It is an expansive country with soaring eagles and darting prairie dogs. Beneath the earth are the splendors of Jewel Cave, and above it stand gnarled cottonwoods old enough to have witnessed the total period of organized government in the region. In April and May each year, the lavender-hued pasque - the official state flower - bursts from untilled sod on pastures and hillsides to signal a new planting season on farmlands lying under open skies in the center of the nation.

While its food and fiber production affects all the states, it physically adjoins six neighbors: North Dakota, which separates it from Canada; Minnesota and Iowa on the east; Montana and Wyoming on the west; and Nebraska to the south. Before 1889 it was part of the vast Dakota Territory. Earlier it was an undefined portion of the Louisiana Purchase from France in 1803 - and before that the Spanish claimed the prairie expanse.

Boundaries are important, of course, because they establish specific political land units and make the application of laws possible, but it must be remembered, too, that a state also means the people living within the particular borders. In other words, the geographic features of South Dakota are like a skeleton; to give it life, the flesh and blood of the citizenry must be added.

Without people there would have been no progress, no problems, no challenges, no achievement nor failures, no sorrow nor joy - the stuff of which history is made.

The parade of people - beginning with the Asiatic ancestors of the American Indians - has both brightened and bloodied the land, but viewed in proper context, the abrasions created by successive waves of newcomers (red and white included) are explainable and understandable - if not always defensible.

By knowing what lured or impelled various groups to migrate to the region which ultimately became South Dakota, one can grasp more readily the substance of the collision of cultures rather than belaboring the surface sore spots. The story is exciting and dramatic, often lighthearted and occasionally tragic. It is, after all, a continuing saga of people of many different backgrounds and the challenges they faced on a specific portion of the earth's real estate.

*Robert F. Karolevitz, **CHALLENGE: THE SOUTH DAKOTA STORY**, (Sioux Falls: Brevet Press, Inc., 1975), pp. 3-5. Edited paragraph one.